

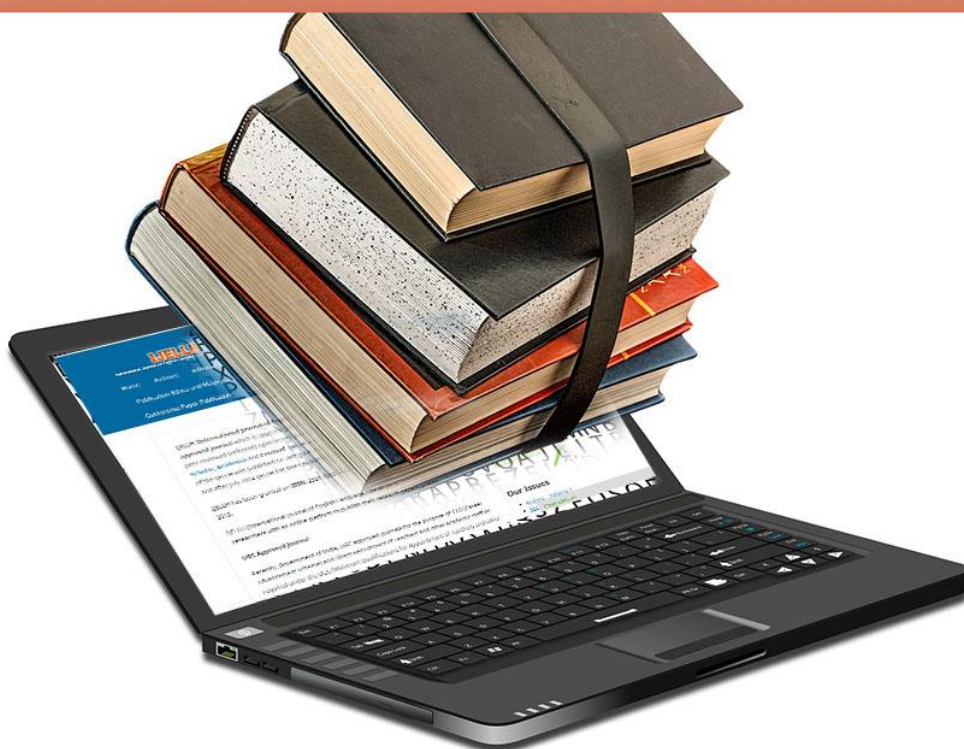
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Kiran Yadav

BA (Hons.) in English Literature.NET,

Shri Ram College, Delhi University.

New Delhi , India

25kiranyadav@gmail.com

### Reading Joyce's 'A Painful Case'

As a part of the larger collection, *Dubliners*, Joyce's short story 'A Painful Case' presents characters which are just as shadowed, convoluted and complex as those in the others. The fictional nature of this story incorporates techniques of writing more commonly associated with the field of journalism and legal discourse. Though Joyce himself cited it as an example of an incompetent piece of writing, its difference from the other stories in *Dubliners* stems mainly from its structural aspect which is at once that of a detached (ironical) reportage and a real evocative presentation of a 'painful' case.

The title of the story is very similar to that of a journalistic report and prepares the readers to encounter a 'case'. 'Case', in dictionary terms, is defined as 'an instance of a particular situation'; it refers to affairs 'particular' rather than 'general'. In the legal vocabulary, 'case' would refer to a set of facts that is 'to be judicially considered' and therefore rhetorically charged through the use of proofs, testimonies and evidence. 'A Painful Case' tries to bring the two definitions together by adopting a distinctive narrative style. Joyce here 'presents two cases one enclosed within the other' (Mahaffey, 241) : Mrs. Sinico's death and the corresponding inquest which is presented as a case in a matter of fact manner and that of Mr. James Duffy whose 'case' forms the central tenet of the overarching narrative. The narrative that unfolds at the textual level makes it known that there is another

narrative which Mr. James Duffy had been weaving for himself – one which is constitutive of his self-serving rhetoric and never written down.

The story begins, unlike any other in the *Dubliners*, with the complete name of ‘Mr. James Duffy’ and goes on to enumerate his distinguishing features, habits, his movements and his associates. It further takes on the vocabulary of medico-legal discourse when it describes that ‘Mr. James Duffy abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder. A mediaeval doctor would have called him saturnine’(93). His existence has become a sum total of his surroundings. Dwelling in a humble suburb in ‘an uncarpeted room free from pictures’, staring out at ‘the disused distillery’ day in and day out and working as a ‘cashier for many years’, he lived: ‘at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances...had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense’(93). His routine and his socially reticent nature allows him to escape any blame, ‘painful incidents’ or ruptures, making his life into an ‘adventureless tale’ (94). This is the ‘case’ of Mr. Duffy’s life that the narrative unfolds and which is quite peculiar of his character.

Duffy’s ‘case’ becomes an ironical parallel to the ‘real case’ of Mrs. Emily Sinico which is written down in cold, matter of fact way in a ‘narrative that revolted’ Mr. Duffy (99). Accompanying this narrative is the frequent use of terms such as ‘blame’ (which occurs four times in the story), ‘guilt’ and a concern with ethics. The narrative of the inquest of Mrs. Sinico’s death is aimed at exonerating people from the ‘blame’ of her death; so that by the time it ends, Mr. Duffy tries to attach that blame to his own self, though momentarily. The story’s journalistic narrative is now interrupted as newer aspects of ‘voices’ and ‘touch’ are brought in. These introduce a certain complexity in the central narrative as Mr. Duffy – who had earlier tried to ‘fix her (Mrs. Sinico) permanently in his memory’- now tries to

understand that 'she had become a memory' (101). This fleeting feeling of guilt allows him to retrospect their relationship in the light of – what he believes to be- his newly acquired knowledge, that she had died the death of a mere commoner.

Until this moment, Mr. James Duffy had tried to furtively deny the existence/importance of another person in his life. He shifted to the chapelized so as to escape the urban crowd; he has tried to stay away from relatives, denied alms to beggars and continued with the same job for years. He lives in the 'text he has created' and over which he exercises a complete control. His 'adventure' with Mrs. Sinico forms a part of the self-serving rhetoric of this text. Till the moment he felt that 'in her eyes he would ascend to an angelic stature'(96), Mr. Duffy's meetings with Mrs. Sinico continued to be satisfactory. When he no longer felt himself to be a 'unique figure' of the socialist party, he starts to despise the workers whom he labels as 'hard core realists'. Mrs. Sinico became his 'confessor' – once again a passive incorporation into his own rhetoric- and finally, their 'friendship' ended when he came to realize that 'her interpretations of his words' were different, which 'disillusioned him' (96).

The moment of 'epiphany' for Mr. Duffy comes when he reads the report stating Mrs. Sinico's death. It has the effect of an ironic exposure where his spiritual/existential deficiency is brought forth. As has been said, he now tries to retrospect their relationship in a new light and this takes on several manifestations such as the feelings of being 'haunted', of getting 'gnawed' by 'the rectitude of his life' and feeling like an 'outcast from life's feast' along with the emotions of 'guilt' and 'blame' – 'She seemed to be near him in the darkness. At moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear, her hand touch his...he felt his moral nature falling to pieces' (101). It is now that Mr. Duffy 'stood still to listen' (101), until now he had been too comfortable with his routine to ever feel the need to listen to anyone else's voice.

The story is narrated from a third person point of view and focalized on Mr. James Duffy. This allows the reader to note the visible perturbations and ruptures that occur in his life once he comes to believe that his created narrative has failed him. The moment of 'epiphany' strikes him unawares and has the effect of overturning the 'orderliness of his mind' that he had preserved for so long. The narrative has carefully recorded his scorn when he had reacted against 'writing down his thoughts' (95) and labelled writers as 'phrasemongers...incapable of thinking consequently for sixty seconds' (95). This, as Michael West points out, is 'Joycean irony consuming its subject unawares' (704). Thus, Mr. Duffy tries to attest a certain kind of superiority to his narrative; so that when Mrs. Sinico dies a 'vulgar' death, he feels cheated; 'Not merely had she degraded herself; she had degraded him' (100).

Thus, the painful case that the story seeks to represent refers to that of Mrs. Sinico as well as that of Mr. Duffy, albeit in terms that makes the latter sound ironical. While the idea is not to pity Mr. Duffy, there are, for a brief moment, feelings of loneliness and unhappiness. What makes such feelings ironical is the reader's knowledge that they are self-imposed and probably flimsy. On the other hand, Mrs. Sinico's life has been a tragedy and the inquest of her death, written in an almost unfeeling way and suggesting that 'the injuries were not sufficient to have caused death in a normal person' (98) makes it even more tragic. The situations of the two characters are completely peculiar to them which allows the story to present a 'case' which is, despite its irony, 'painful'.

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